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Digital Journeys @ UOW Australia: From Digital Dexterities to Digital Humanities and Beyond

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Abstract

In 2018, the University of Wollongong (UOW) launched The Future-Ready Library strategy. The inevitable question arose: How does one become 'future-ready'? The answer lies, in part, in proactively engaging with evolving technologies and improving individual staff digital dexterities. Coinciding with release of The Future-Ready Library strategy, the Digital Literacy Workplace Program was put in place to foster upskilling opportunities for Library staff. One of the outcomes of this program was the creation of a local Digital Humanities Community of Practice in 2018. This article focuses on the transformative journey of the Community of Practice in developing staff digital dexterity through the completion of mini projects. These mini projects incorporated both hard and soft skillsets to develop agile, future-focused, T-shaped professionals. While initially directed at developing digital dexterity and increased knowledge of the Digital Humanities, the Community of Practice recognized the need for adoption of a broader, more strategic approach, to support clients and staff in this area. This resulted in the launch of the Digital Scholarship Strategy project in 2020. The project group was tasked with scoping the feasibility of initiating a Library-led roll-out across the organization, or a tighter focused implementation within the UOW Library operational environment. The expedited move to online teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the timeliness and applicability of these initiatives.

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Digital journeys @ UOW Australia: from digital dexterities to digital humanities and beyond

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Keywords: Digital humanities; digital dexterity; digitisation; community of practice; digital scholarship; professional development; digitalization

Abstract: In 2018 the University of Wollongong (UOW) launched *The Future-Ready Library* strategy. The inevitable question arose: *How does one become 'future-ready'?* The answer lies, in part, in proactively engaging with evolving technologies and improving individual staff digital dexterities. Coinciding with release of *The Future-Ready Library* strategy, the *Digital Literacy Workplace Program* was put in place to foster upskilling opportunities for Library staff. One of the outcomes of this program was the creation of a local Digital Humanities Community of Practice in 2018. This article focuses on the transformative journey of the Community of Practice in developing staff digital dexterity through the completion of mini projects. These mini projects incorporated both hard and soft skillsets to develop agile, future-focused, T-shaped professionals. While initially directed at developing digital dexterity and increased

knowledge of the Digital Humanities, the Community of Practice recognised the need for adoption of a broader, more strategic approach, to support clients and staff in this area. This resulted in the launch of the Digital Scholarship Strategy project in 2020. The project group was tasked with scoping the feasibility of initiating a Library-led roll-out across the organisation, or a tighter focused implementation within the UOW Library operational environment. The expedited move to online teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the timeliness and applicability of these initiatives.

Introduction

In February 2018, the University of Wollongong (UOW) launched *The Future-Ready Library* strategy, addressing the online-first environment and technological expectations of the UOW community (Jantti 2018). The inevitable question arose: *How does one become 'future-ready'?* The answer lies, in part, in proactively engaging with evolving technologies and improving individual staff digital dexterities. Coinciding with release of *The Future-Ready Library* strategy, the *Digital Literacy Workplace Program* was initiated to foster upskilling opportunities for Library staff. One of the outcomes of this program was the creation of a local Digital Humanities Community of Practice. Its vision was to enhance the digital dexterity of UOW Library staff through direct engagement with Digital Humanities tools and an awareness of the opportunities available through innovation within that discipline. This article focuses on the work of that group and its transformative journey.

Digital Humanities

The Digital Humanities Community of Practice was formed in May 2018 as part of the *Digital Literacy Workplace Program* to foster and grow the digital dexterity of the UOW Library's workforce. Digital dexterity goes beyond digital literacy in that it encompasses the cognitive ability to leverage digital technologies in innovative ways to improve personal and business practices (Rolf 2020). The Community

of Practice was formed through a shared interest in, and passion for, the Digital Humanities, and a perceived need within the institution to keep pace with new technologies in higher education research, and teaching and learning spaces. It comprised members of staff from the UOW Library who were seeking to share knowledge and explore and experiment with new, evolving and innovative technologies. Using the community of practice format, digital dexterities were developed in unison with an expanded knowledge base of Digital Humanities tools. One of the first tasks of the group was to develop a definition of Digital Humanities, in order to move forward with a clear focus. A text based on an analysis of widely dispersed definitions was adopted, and posted on the group's blog:

Digital Humanities is basically the interaction between the digital world and technology, and the humanities disciplines. For example, if we use a computer program to search a database of digitised images and present them in a certain order, then we are engaging with a product of the Digital Humanities; if we use a computer application, such as face recognition technology, then we are seeing the result of research in the Digital Humanities (Digital Humanities Community of Practice 2018a).

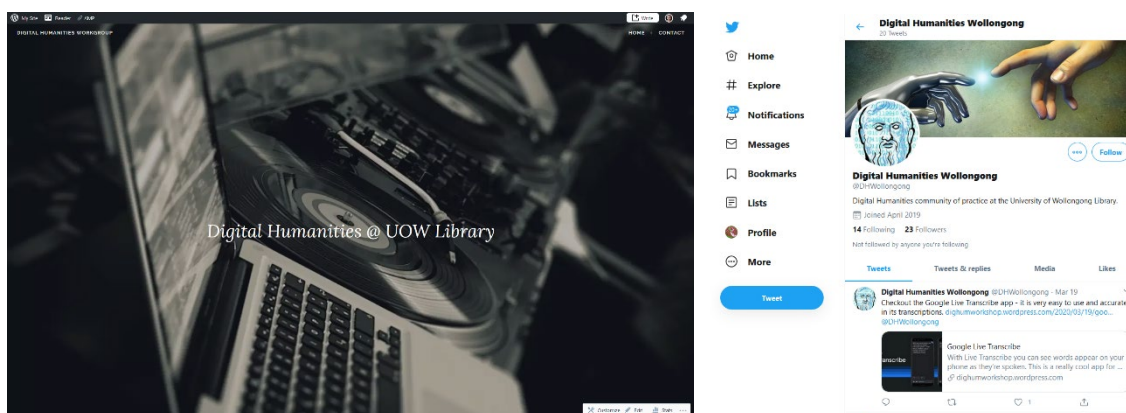
UOW Library staff first became aware of Digital Humanities as a distinct discipline around 2012, and specifically through the work of Australian academics Deb Verhoeven and Tim Sherratt (Verhoeven 2012, Sherratt 2011). This coincided with the formalisation of a local digitisation program and subsequent work in the online and virtual realms with academics, students, programmers and educational developers. The onset of the open access movement early in the 2000s encouraged local digitisation programs and upskilling of staff in areas of scanning, preparation of pdf files with optical character recognition of text, manipulation of images and, ultimately, the creation and dispersal of streaming audio-visual content. The associated technical aspects were often daunting, leading to collaboration with external parties and those with expertise in the area of information technology.

The development of skills in the digital domain was part of this process. These activities also comprised the first, tentative steps into the Digital Humanities realm by UOW Library staff. One outcome of these activities was the opening of the *Wry Artificer: Art of Bert Flugelman* exhibition in the Library's Panizzi Gallery during November 2018 (White 2018). The exhibition consisted of a multimedia presentation which combined traditional art gallery, library and archival materials with a mix of digital and virtual content made accessible online. In developing and staging *Wry Artificer*, it became obvious to Library staff that there were intersections between the digitisation of library and archival resources, the application of Digital Humanities tools, and digital dexterity initiatives. The staging of the exhibition provided a sandpit in which staff could engage and experiment with the practical application of new and innovative technologies. It was within such an environment that, early in 2018, the idea of a Digital Humanities Community of Practice arose.

A community of practice

The key goal of the Community of Practice was to foster and grow staff digital dexterity through the completion of mini projects in the Digital Humanities realm. These mini projects were generally undertaken on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and were designed to incorporate both hard and soft skillsets in order to develop agile, future-focused, T-shaped professionals. Members would learn a hard skill such as using a mapping tool or web programming language, in addition to soft skills such as presenting, teaching, tweeting, networking, creative thinking, and collaboration. The Community of Practice was designed to support members with a range of digital capabilities from beginner to advanced. Those members with advanced skills in a specific area would extend their knowledge base by exploring and learning new technologies and teaching them to the wider group. All members of the Community of Practice would bring ideas and enthusiasm to the table. Library managers and administration would be kept abreast of the work of the Community of Practice through regular online and person-to-person or group communication. The group would also open itself up to new members from amongst Library staff.

In order to record and promote the work of the Digital Humanities Community of Practice, a WordPress blog was created. A Twitter site was also developed to share information with the broader Digital Humanities community and keep group members informed as to new applications, online learning modules, opportunities for engagement through meetings and conferences, and initiatives such as the GLAM Labs movement (Digital Humanities Community of Practice 2018b). Additionally, and in association with the “work from home” environment created during the COVID-19 pandemic, a Digital Humanities Community of Practice channel was set up during April 2020 within the Microsoft Teams application. This was for internal communication amongst Library staff in lieu of regular face-to-face meetings.



UOW Library Digital Humanities Community of Practice blog and Twitter sites.

The use of Twitter was a valuable learning experience for those staff members not actively involved in the lively and innovative social media environment. Familiarisation with Twitter functionality would prove useful, for example, in conference attendance and live engagement therein with presenters and attendees.

From July 2018 the group's blog recorded examples of experimentation with various applications and tools, and the learnings arising from that:

2018

23 July – [Trove Harvester](#)

4 September – [Mapping Tools](#)

5 September – [A leap of code ...](#)

6 September – [Story Map](#)

19 September – [Story Map #2](#)

2 October – [Great discussion opportunities](#)

16 October – [Timeline JS](#)

26 October – [ImageLink](#)

6 December – [Finding & reusing historical images](#)

2019

22 January – [Arduino coding](#)

11 February – [Introduction to web coding](#)

21 March – [HTML, CSS and Javascript](#)

3 – 17 April – [Website creation](#)

29 May – [Carto](#)

9 June – [Data visualisation](#)

14 June – [Gephi](#)

26 June – [WebScraping](#)

10 July – [Data Visualisation – Google Earth and Hiroshima](#)

18 December – [From Tinker to an Australian GLAM Labs Network](#)

2020

19 March – [Google Live Transcribe](#)

In order to increase Community of Practice engagement, individual and localised projects were encouraged. For example, during 2019 the group used the LibApps, LibWizard, Google Maps and Google Earth applications to undertake a survey of Library staff on places they had visited around the world (Digital Humanities Community of Practice 2019a, b). The result was an interactive world map, publicly accessible through the 3D-enhanced Google Earth application.



2019 UOW Library staff survey, Google Earth representation.

External drivers

In pushing the boundaries of their existing technological comfort, members of the Community of Practice overcame challenges, resulting in the development of resilience and a growth mindset. This combination, along with the acquisition of a portfolio of hard and soft digital skills, would transform staff into future-ready T-shaped professionals with an enhanced ability to flourish in an agile and dexterous organisation (Moghaddam et al 2018). One of the unforeseen outcomes of the Digital Humanities Community of Practice was the recognition that it was not a group in isolation, but part of the Library's broader progression towards digitalisation. This term, unlike the more common 'digitisation', is broader and more

strategically significant in that it refers to the act of changing business processes using digital technology (Brother Corporation 2019). The takeaways from the work of the Community of Practice were therefore of both an individualised and organisation-wide character. For example, members of the Library's Liaison Services Team were better able to communicate with faculty seeking assistance in the area of data visualisation tools and general digital dexterity issues.

The formation of the Digital Humanities Community of Practice was timely as it coincided with a growth in interest from academics, researchers and students for Library support, and engagement with, complex technological applications which appeared to offer solutions to challenges in the areas of research, teaching, learning and student engagement. The external environment was one which saw rapid technological change in Higher Education with the adoption of technology enhanced learning, virtual and augmented reality environments, data visualisation software, research data management initiatives, digital publishing, text and data mining, and cloud-based storage systems. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020 initiated the expeditious deployment of large-scale online course delivery at institutions such as the University of Wollongong (University of Wollongong 2020). This process inherently brought to the fore the importance of digital technologies and the need for agile, digitally dexterous staff.

An environmental scan of the Australian and international Higher Education and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector during the first year of the Community of Practice identified a growing trend towards providing support for the development of more advanced digital skills in library staff and a role for libraries in supporting digital scholarship initiatives. For example, the State Library of New South Wales' DX Lab, data storytelling workshops at Griffith University Library, and data carpentry workshops at Macquarie University Library were examples of the expansion of the Digital Humanities into practical areas both within and beyond the academic environment (Bray 2017, Calvey et al. 2019, Poulton et al. 2019). These elements acted as everyday enablers of innovation, whilst heightening client expectations. Higher Education and GLAM sector professions had become increasingly reliant on digital

skills as core enablers, and UOW Library was keen to keep pace with these changes and challenges. The Digital Humanities Community of Practice was a significant element of the practical implementation of *The Future-Ready Library* program.

A digital scholarship future

One of the outcomes of the UOW Digital Humanities Community of Practice was a recognition towards the end of 2019 of the need for adoption of a broader, more strategic approach, to support clients and staff in this area. To continue to develop the *future-ready* initiative, staff moved toward investigations into the area of 'digital scholarship', as an umbrella term reflecting the diverse elements of digitalisation in a multidisciplinary university context. As part of that ongoing process, consideration would be given to development of a support framework, taking on board lessons learned from the Digital Humanities Community of Practice, and discussions with professional staff and faculty.

What was next for the University of Wollongong Library? The first half of 2020 saw the instigation of the Digital Scholarship Strategy Project, tasked with scoping the feasibility of initiating a Library-led roll-out across the organisation, or a tighter focused implementation within the UOW Library operational environment. As with the Digital Humanities Community of Practice, one of the first tasks was to ask, and answer, the question: *What is digital scholarship?* The international landscape was quite varied in this regard, with very broad uses of the term evident over an extensive period of time, and in connection with both theoretical and practical applications (Poh-Sun and Sandars 2019, Sinclair 2014, University of Melbourne 2020, University of Southern California 2020, Wikipedia 2020). An initial assessment highlighted an emphasis on digital tools and methodologies, and the fact that digital scholarship was, and is, a transformative process which enhances traditional methods of research, and encompasses data analysis, collaboration, research dissemination, publication, curation and preservation (Greenhall 2019 p.7, University of Chicago Library 2020). With such a broad definition the project group would investigate

what a sustainable approach to digital scholarship could look like at the University of Wollongong. A strategic approach to digital scholarship is expected to drive innovation and change; increase research impact and visibility; support researchers in producing richer, multidimensional scholarship; increase engagement with digital collections; and develop future-ready graduates and staff.

Conclusion

The Digital Humanities Community of Practice journey, alongside the various UOW Library digitisation programs and digital dexterity initiatives, taught its participants that to be future-ready, staff needed to be supported by the workplace, primarily in the allocation of time towards development of professional skillsets. Resource allocation was minimal. Keeping pace with change was imperative and is, ideally, enabled through scholarly communication channels such as social media sites, one-on-one and group online meetings, conference and workshop attendance and the dissemination of learnings through publications and presentations. Staff also need to work collaboratively and seek partnerships, especially regarding the use of complex technologies which inevitably go beyond their inherent skill set. They must be forward looking, proactive, open to new ideas and not afraid to experiment and be creative. Success and failure go side by side in such a technology-focused workspace. The Digital Humanities Community of Practice provided an environment where much of this was fostered. It also gave rise to a professional workspace in which big picture discussions and a growing awareness of opportunities led to the Community of Practice championing a transformative strategic direction for the Library. The development of a digital scholarship strategy is therefore seen as a way to broaden the reach of those learnings and extend the participation beyond the group and through to the wider university community.

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